

3D Artist

Q&A: ILMxLAB VFX artist Martin La Land Romero

NEWS & FEATURES

by Carrie Mok

We caught up with the VFX artist with over a decade of experience under his belt



Martin La Land Romero is a VFX artist at ILMxLAB born in Nicaragua and has always been fascinated with the immersive experience of videogames and the magic of film. Over the last decade, Martin has been creating all

sorts of effects across several genres and games titles. He is currently enjoying creating effects for ILMxLAB. We spoke to Martin about his career so far and to find out more about his workflows.

Titles shipped:

Personal Project :Nostro (2016)

DC Comics Legends (2016)

Dawngate PC (2013) (2014)

SimCity: Cities Of Tomorrow PC (2013)

Tomb Raider Console/PC (2013)

Thor: God of Thunder Console (2011)

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2 Console (2009)

Not shipped:

2 titles, PC, Console.

3DA: As a VFX artist, what is it that you love about effects compared to other 3D disciplines?

MR: I love that creating visual effects is about bringing things to life, adding that little dynamic element to bring your eye to something. It's also a lot about problem-solving, it's creative, yet all at the same time very technical. It keeps me thoroughly engaged, and I think it's that balance that draws me to VFX over other 3D disciplines.



3DA: Which software do you use in your day to day work?

MR: It varies widely depending on the needs of the project, but for realtime VFX, I usually rely on such go-to creative packages as Houdini, Maya, Nuke and After Effects to generate my 2D or 3D assets. Those are then imported into whichever game engine we are using for the project for further refining, placement, replication and polish. It's always a good idea to be in touch with newly developing VFX tools, for example while creating my sci-fi scenes for Nostro I really enjoyed using PopcornFX for most of the effects in the scene. One of the cool things about it is having a generic particle system that you can add parameters too all while being able to modify this in the individual instance level.

UE4 has something like it, but not as flexible nor customisable. Another great thing about [PopcornFX](#) is how particles get batched. One is able to have several instances of one effect and it's the same draw call for all placements, which is really great because it allows for creative systems with minimal cost in the engine.

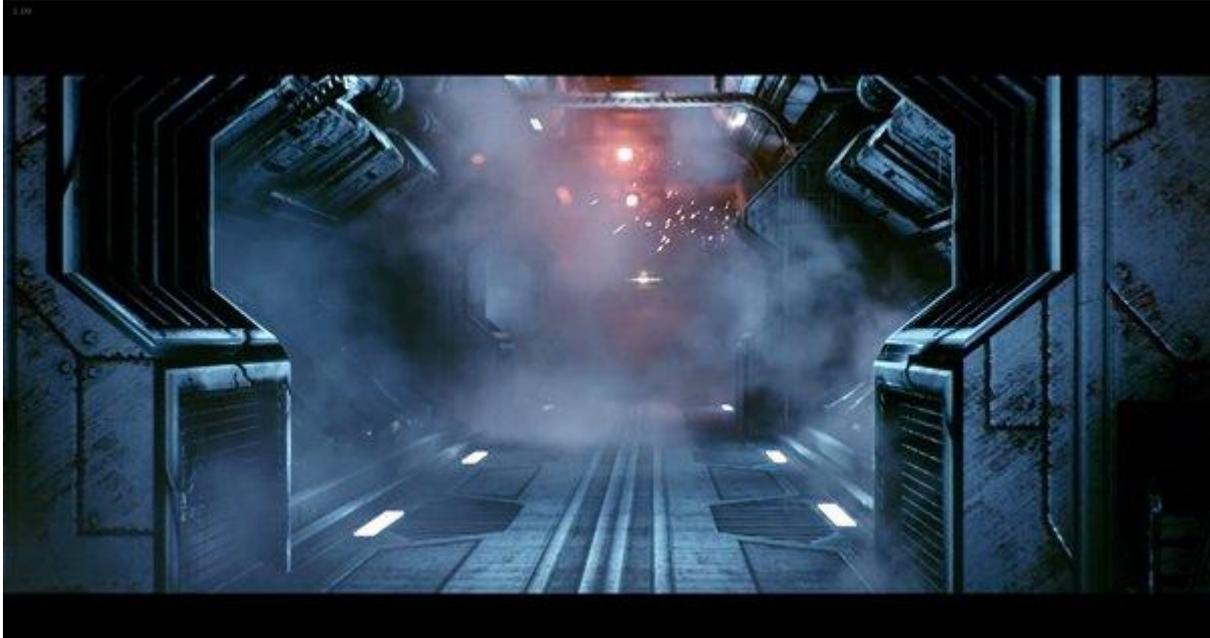
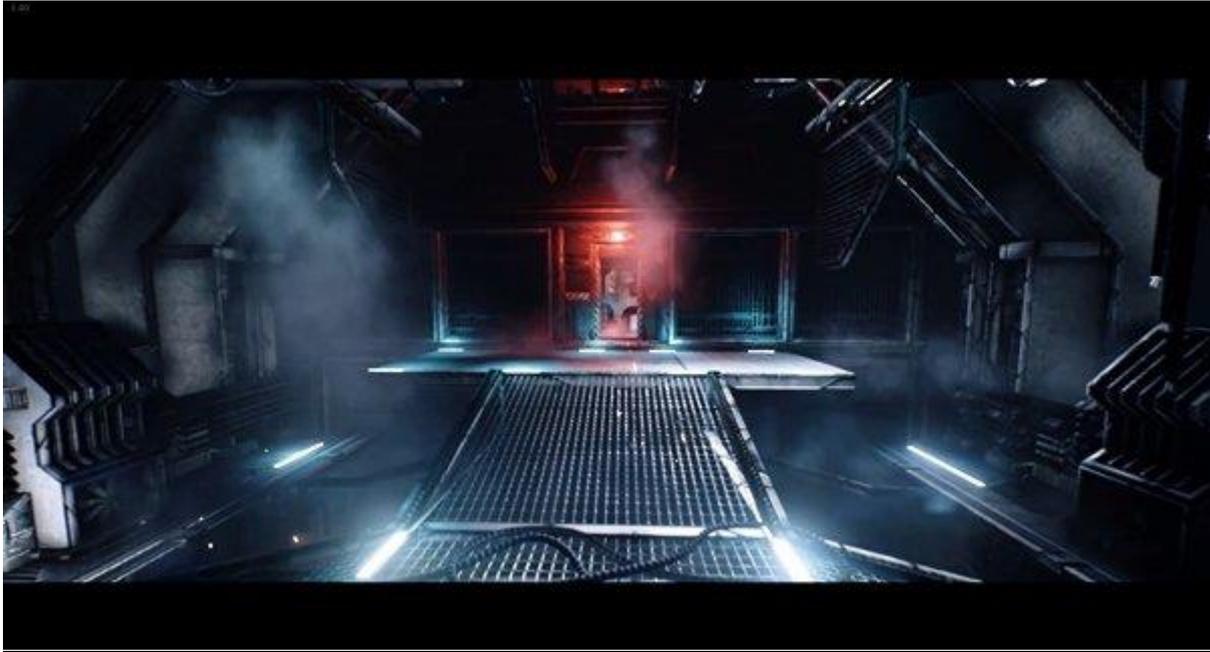
3DA: Can you run us through a typical day working as an FX artist?

MR: Sure, I start off by looking for inspirational material, whether it be tutorials or demo reels, or really anything that gets my imagination going. I then examine the task at hand to start gathering specific reference material. Through the years I've learned that you really can never have enough reference. It is the best secret weapon to making something look like it's meant to be. For example, we've all seen a hundred explosions through various media and it might seem like you should know what's needed. However, I am always learning something new from the references, and this might often lead me to picking up a new method or skill that allows me to give my piece a new or unique feeling closer to the reference. Next, I start working on the different layers that will make up the effect. Usually the first order of business is to try to get the correct physics of what I am after. So let's say it's an explosion, I'd work on the velocity and gravity for the sparks, and or the energy of the shockwave. Working on the actual behaviour of the overall effect is key, I don't worry too much if the materials are working at the early stage. Then once I have the rough behaviour of the effect, I move on to refining the look of each one of its elements. Call me crazy, but in all these years this just so happens to be true, at least in my experience. The next part is about seeking out feedback and making adjustments based on your notes to be able to meet the director's project vision as well. Being open to iterate and accept feedback becomes a crucial part of working effectively as a VFX artist on a team project that is a process that continues until we are ready to move onto the next task.



3DA: What has been your favourite project that you've worked on so far?

MR: I can truly and honestly say that I am really working in my dream job right now, and challenged daily to push the edge in VFX. However, I'm not able to describe that work in more detail at this time. I will however say that working on Tomb Raider 2013 so early in my career was an incredible honour, and one of the coolest published projects that I've worked on. The demands of a large scale project like that are challenging, but what I loved was the creativity and doing the best we could with the tools we had.



3DA: Can you tell us any recent FX challenges you've had and for what project. Could you also tell us how you solved it?

MR: I hit a couple of bumps with my own sci-fi project Nostro, where I was responsible for the entirety of the scene including; lighting, material work, effects, post process VFX, camera work as well as editing. I think one of the toughest challenges was to tackle a larger project like that single handedly. So I needed to throw on the producer cap for a bit to break down my tasks as if I was working for a client, and at the end it was that mentality along with executing the VFX that made the project look like it was built by a game team.

3DA: What's one piece of advice you would give to aspiring artists hoping to join the film industry?

MR: My advice, look at references and follow them as closely as possible when creating VFX. Don't be afraid to start over if it's not working, it will come out better the next time around. Give yourself a challenging task, for example, take a look at a movie shot and try to mimic whatever is happening in a specific shot. Perhaps it is an establishing shot right before the car blows up, a big flash followed by a shockwave kicking up dust on the ground, with pieces of debris scattering across the ground. This is momentarily followed by the rolling explosion and tendrils of smoke rising from it, pieces of the car covered in flames and smoke. So while this is a generic type of effect for some, put your signature on it give it a twist. Give your work a unique touch, we are all different, each one of us has something unique and special to share, what's yours?

